

Mine plan is a good deal

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The new mercury-control program adopted by the mining industry and the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection, aiming to reduce emissions, is a good deal for this state, whose mines five years ago led the nation in toxic substances released into the environment.

This agreement affecting gold mines, which generate airborne mercury as a product of extracting and refining the precious metal, and NDEP, whose job it is to protect the environment, is encouraging. With these two entities working together, it may be possible to reduce mercury emissions levels to near zero.

The problem with mercury is its capacity to be absorbed into living tissue. Scientists say it settles in waterways and travels up the food chain from fish to humans and can cause central nervous system and brain damage, with the greatest risk to children and developing fetuses. It's why school officials displayed such discomfort after discovering that students had played with the substance. And why critics in Utah and Idaho complain about emissions-polluted air wafting across their common borders with Nevada.

Fortunately, industry representatives recognize how critical it can be to tighten regulations and test regularly. Although samples taken this summer near Elko-area mines registered mercury concentrations of more than 100 times expected levels, a voluntary program begun in 2001 -- after the Environmental Protection Agency ranked Nevada as the No. 1 emitter of mercury -- reduced emissions nearly 75 percent in Nevada's four largest gold mining operations.

Since stricter regulations already have resulted in positive results, environmentalists and conservationists have less cause for concern. This program accommodates their recommendations for intensifying monitoring, testing, record keeping and reporting. Smokestack scrubbers will be installed and other technology will be utilized.

That the mining industry and regulators are working together is a selling point for this agreement, rather than a cause for suspicion.

By supporting the plan and agreeing to make it mandatory, the industry is declaring its intention to reduce emissions as close as possible to zero. Critics should give the industry time to make good on the plan.